

A Long Life With Many Trials': Joshua Chamberlain Earned His Mythic Aura

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Review

A LONG LIFE WITH MANY TRIALS' **Joshua Chamberlain earned his mythic aura**

Herberger, Charles F.

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Pullen, John J. *Joshua Chamberlain: A Hero's Life & Legacy.* Stackpole, ISBN 811708861

In an era in which the very idea of heroism is mocked, the anti-hero is celebrated, and military virtues in particular are far from popular, it is refreshing to encounter a book that, like an unflawed mirror, reflects the career of a man who both as a soldier and a citizen justly deserves the title of hero.

Not that John J. Pullen's portrait is lacking in objectivity or is in any way approaching hagiography, for he is most careful in distinguishing between facts and the nimbus of mythology, which lately by fiction and film has enhanced the image of Joshua Chamberlain. No. The author points out that the mythic element rests on a firm foundation of fact that has been a catalyst to the mythic aura and that mythology itself is not to be despised as a motivator of noble behavior.

The bayonet charge at Little Roundtop at Gettysburg, which was so crucial in that battle, was not the only act of heroism in Chamberlain's life, as Pullen amply demonstrates. Yet in a sense it defined his character, initiated his fame, and echoed in the background of a long life with many trials. The primary focus of the book is upon Chamberlain's career after the Civil War -- and that was, at least in its early stages, a political career.

Pullen shows why Chamberlain was not cut out to be a successful politician. He was a man of principle, uncompromising in his values, and therefore it is not surprising that he made enemies. When faced with a choice -- between the general good and humane behavior, or party loyalty and political expediency that might further his own self-interest -- he always chose the noble path.

He was four times elected governor of Maine as a Republican, but as Pullen calls him, a "reluctant Republican." The Republican Party leader, James G. Blaine, and the Radical Republicans in control of Congress in the Reconstruction years wished to reduce the Southern states to the status of territories. Chamberlain declined to follow the party line. At Appomattox he had gallantly offered an arms salute of his men to the surrendering Confederate officers. He opposed legislation that would, in effect, bar responsible white Southerners from any public post of leadership, and he opposed the unconstitutional infringements on President Andrew Johnson's powers. He resisted the extreme Prohibitionists in his party and enforced a court verdict of capital punishment for a cruel and brutal double murder by a black man. The result of taking these unpopular stands was political eclipse.

But his career of service to the people of Maine was not over. He initiated forward-looking reforms in education as president of Bowdoin College, saved Maine from threatened civil war over an election controversy as adjutant general, and faithfully carried out his duties in the humble office of surveyor of customs in Portland in his declining years. Despite decades of obscurity immediately following his death in 1914, of late his fame has revived through books and film and wide public recognition. Pullen's book is a worthy tribute to Chamberlain's lasting legacy.

Charles F. Herberger, professor emeritus of Nason College, is editor of A Yankee at Arms: The Diary of Lieutenant Augustus D. Ayling, 29th Massachusetts Volunteers and author of books and articles on historical topics.